

US frame-up victim Affia Siddiqui sentenced to 86 years

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4 October 2010

On September 24, a US federal judge sentenced Pakistani neuroscientist Affia Siddiqui to 86 years in prison. Siddiqui had been convicted on seven charges last February, including attempted murder and armed assault of US officers. The harsh sentence has come as a shock to Siddiqui's relatives, human rights organizations, and to her supporters in Pakistan. The sentencing has sparked protests throughout her native country, where Siddiqui's ordeal has received a great deal of media coverage and has outraged Pakistanis.

According to US prosecutors, Affia Siddiqui was arrested by Afghan authorities in Ghazni in July of 2008 after they allegedly found a list of American targets for terrorist attacks as well as bomb-making instructions and various chemicals. They claim that when a group of FBI agents and US Army officers came to collect Siddiqui, she seized an automatic weapon and fired on her Afghan and American captors. Siddiqui was shot twice in the stomach and barely survived after medics at Bagram air field operated on her to remove the bullets.

The accusations against Siddiqui stretched credulity and have been denied by her relatives, attorneys, and human rights organizations, all of whom continue to insist that Siddiqui was held captive in secret US detention facilities where she was repeatedly subjected to torture and inhumane treatment ever since she disappeared along with her three children in the spring of 2003.

Affia Siddiqui is a Pakistani national who was educated at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Brandeis University. Following the events of September 11, she and her husband at the time moved back to Pakistan after they were harassed by the FBI for their association with Islamic charities. The family took up residence in Karachi, where Siddiqui was employed at Aga Khan University.

According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Affia Siddiqui and her children were kidnapped by Pakistani intelligence agents on their way to the airport in Karachi. Their whereabouts remained unknown for several years, until Siddiqui and her eldest son, Ahmed, were reported to be detained in Afghanistan in July of 2008. The Pakistani Interior Ministry initially acknowledged that the abduction had taken place, but later claimed it had been mistaken, and that Siddiqui was not in Pakistani custody. This was part of a desperate attempt to conceal the complicity of Pakistani authorities in US government's rendition of Siddiqui to Afghanistan and the events that followed.

Dr. Fauzia Siddiqui, Affia Siddiqui's sister, claims she traveled to the US along with her mother to meet with FBI officials. There they were led to believe that Siddiqui would be released and allowed to return to Pakistan. In Pakistan, the family was warned not to make any appeals on behalf of Siddiqui. The family received numerous death threats from shadowy figures within the Pakistani ruling elite.

Between 2003 and 2008, when Affia Siddiqui's whereabouts were unknown, the US was claiming that she was an Al Qaeda operative. In 2004, she was listed as one of the seven "most wanted" Al Qaeda fugitives.

While the US military and FBI continue to deny that Siddiqui had been in US custody prior to her arrest in 2008, Siddiqui's supporters insist that she was kidnapped in 2003 and detained at Bagram air base, where many referred to her as the "Grey Lady of Bagram." British journalist Yvonne Ridley had been bringing attention to an unknown female detainee in Bagram prison around the same time as Siddiqui's arrest in 2008. The woman's screams greatly distressed other detainees at the facility. In his book, *Enemy Combatant*, Moazzam Begg recounted hearing the woman's screams as she was being tortured while he was imprisoned at Bagram.

When Siddiqui was arrested in Afghanistan in 2008, her son Ahmed was alongside her. Ahmed, born in the US, is an American citizen. While he has been repatriated back to Pakistan, he has been placed under a gag order, barred from speaking to the news media, according to his aunt. Last April, unknown men delivered Siddiqui's 12-year-old daughter Maryam, also a US citizen, to her aunt, Dr. Fauzia Siddiqui's home in Karachi. The girl only spoke English and did not recognize any of her family members. She had to be fingerprinted to confirm her identity and has also been forbidden from speaking to the media. Pakistani authorities have yet to explain where Maryam Siddiqui had been for the previous seven years and how she ended up at her aunt's home in Karachi. One of Siddiqui's children, Suleman, is still missing and is believed to have been killed in the course of Siddiqui's abduction.

Siddiqui's trial was been marked by irregularities from the beginning, with federal Judge Richard Berman going out of his way to accommodate the prosecutors. Siddiqui's attorneys objected to the robust security measures put in place during the trial in an obvious attempt to reinforce the notion that Siddiqui poses a threat to the US and to intimidate her supporters. It is especially telling that Siddiqui was never charged with terrorism or

any terror-related offences. The tabloid press in New York took her guilt for granted and dubbed her “Lady Al Qaeda.” The trial itself received relatively little US media attention, considering that Siddiqui was supposed to be a top Al Qaeda suspect.

The rigged character of Affia Siddiqui’s trial was demonstrated throughout the proceedings. When Siddiqui was first brought to court, she was in agonizing pain from the wounds she sustained in Afghanistan. Her lawyers tried to have the trial delayed and argued that she was mentally unfit to participate in her own defense. However, when prosecutors were able to find mental health experts willing to allege that Siddiqui was faking her condition to escape punishment, Judge Berman sided with the prosecution and ruled that she was mentally fit for trial.

While US authorities failed to produce any terror charges against her, the prosecution was allowed to influence the jury by frequently alleging that Siddiqui had been planning to carry out a terror attack in New York City. This allegation was based solely on the evidence allegedly found in Siddiqui’s possession a day before the shooting incident, including a list of possible targets in New York City, bomb-making instructions, and assorted chemicals. The prosecution never bothered to explain why Affia Siddiqui would be wandering around a small and remote Afghan city with her young son while carrying material that connected her to supposed terror plots in the US. As her attorney, Elaine Sharp, noted in 2008, Siddiqui had been carrying what can only be described as “conveniently incriminating evidence.”

While Judge Berman allowed prosecutors to introduce this completely unrelated, and most likely planted evidence, Siddiqui’s attorneys were barred from introducing any evidence relating to her abduction and imprisonment prior to her arrest in 2008. Moreover, whenever Siddiqui tried to raise her abduction and detention she was thrown out of the courtroom.

Berman also allowed an unnamed Army warrant officer whom Siddiqui allegedly shot at to tearfully recount how he had been wounded in totally unrelated roadside bombing in Afghanistan. While the roadside bombing had no relevance to the trial, the soldier’s wounds were invoked as part of a blatant attempt to sway the jury. When the prosecutors made their closing argument, they told the jury that to find Siddiqui not guilty was to brand the “men and women of our armed forces” as liars.

Siddiqui’s defense team had based its case on the lack of any forensic evidence proving that Siddiqui had shot at the soldiers. The prosecution failed to produce any evidence that Siddiqui grabbed a gun in the first place. The gun she was alleged to have fired did not have her fingerprints on it. Investigators were unable to find any shell casings, bullets or fragments. And no gunshot residue was found on Siddiqui’s hands.

While FBI Special Agent Bruce Kamerman testified that Siddiqui had grabbed the assault rifle in a fit of rage, he was noticeably distressed when one of Siddiqui’s lawyers produced his hand-written notes in which there was no mention of her grabbing the gun.

When prosecutors attempted to use a photo showing two holes in the wall of a police station as evidence of shots fired, Siddiqui’s lawyers rebutted the claim by presenting a video that had been recorded prior to the alleged shooting in which the same holes

were clearly visible.

In spite of the obviously fabricated character of the prosecution’s case, Affia Siddiqui was found guilty of seven counts of attempted murder on February 3. Protests erupted across Pakistan in response to the verdict. Siddiqui’s case has highlighted the plight of hundreds if not thousands of Pakistanis who have been kidnapped by Pakistani intelligence agents and handed over to US personnel, never to be seen or heard from again. Relatives of the “disappeared” routinely hold demonstrations demanding the return of their loved ones to no avail.

Mass demonstrations have been held in every major Pakistani city in response to the harsh sentencing. In Karachi, protestors burned tires and effigies of President Obama, and chanted anti-US slogans. In Peshawar, many protestors threw shoes at a portrait of Obama. Students in Islamabad were incensed, with many chanting “Crush America, Siddiqui is our sister” and “We will bring her back.” In Multan, dozens of lawyers burned effigies of Obama as well as former Pakistani dictator Pervez Musharraf.

Siddiqui’s ordeal has only exacerbated anti-US sentiment, already widespread due to CIA drone attacks and US military incursions. Ordinary Pakistanis are also outraged at their government’s appalling collusion in the abduction and rendition of Siddiqui and her children. Various Pakistani politicians and have made hypocritical appeals on her behalf. Altaf Hussain, leader of the Karachi-based MQM, claimed that, if in power, “MQM would have immediately severed ties with the US and its allies...” In reality, MQM has been an enthusiastic supporter of Pakistan’s participation in the “war on terror,” and bears responsibility for the plight of Siddiqui and hundreds of others like her

President Zardari and Prime Minister Gilani have pledged to bring Siddiqui back to Pakistan. Interior Minister Rehman Malik has written a letter to the US requesting that Siddiqui be released on “humanitarian grounds.” These appeals are little more than a desperate attempt at damage control. As Affia Siddiqui’s sister noted, if Pakistan really wanted to free her sister, it would cut off all supplies to the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan.



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